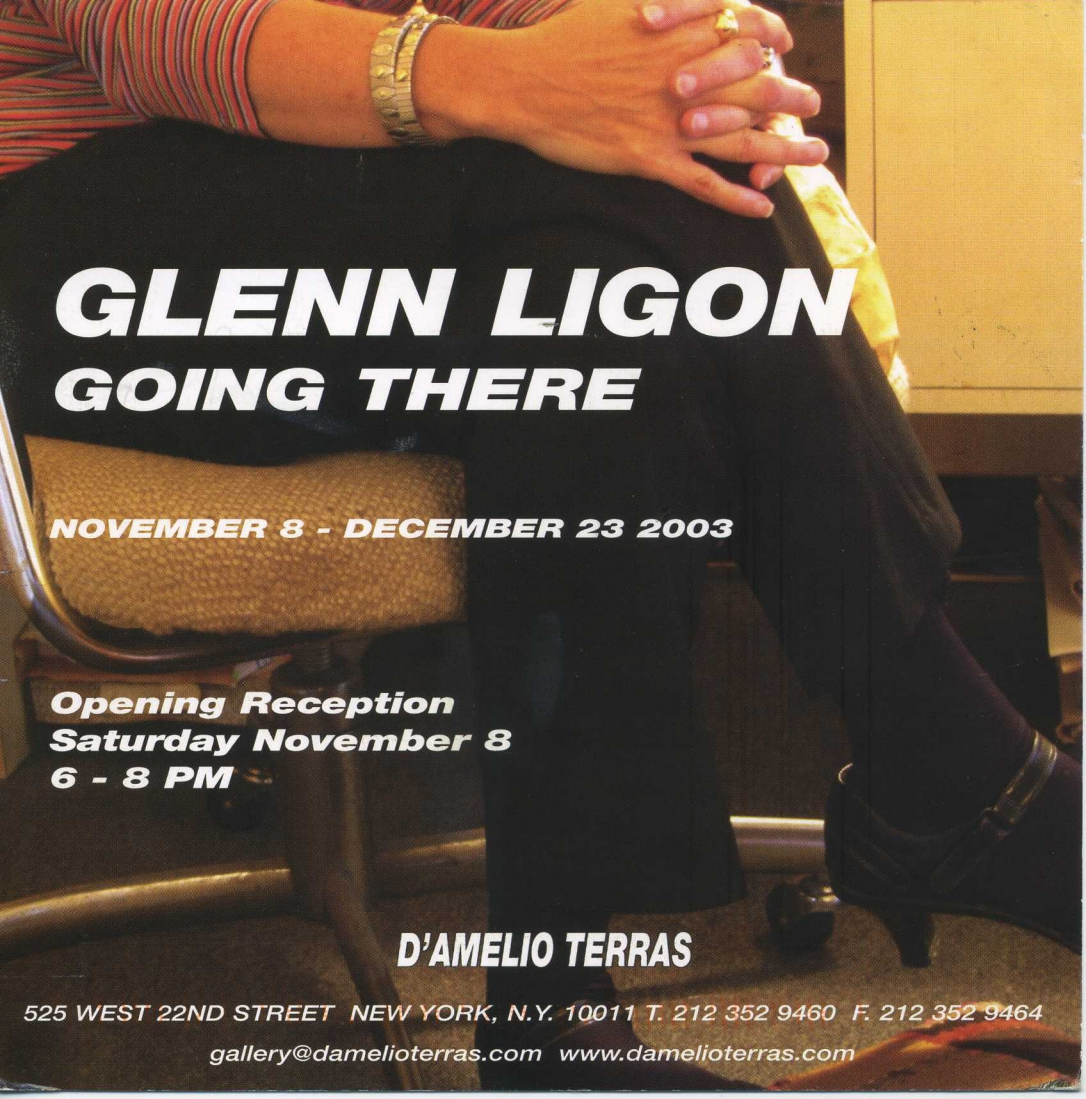

GLENN LIGON
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NOVEMBER 8 - DECEMBER 23 2003
Opening Reception
Saturday November 8
6 - 8 PM
D'AMELIO TERRAS
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Nothing Under the Sun


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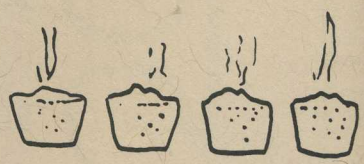

GLENN LIGON
COLORED
MAY 5 - JUNE 9 2001
Opening Reception
Saturday May 5
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525 WEST 22ND STREET NEW YORK, N.Y. 10011 T. 212 352 9460 F. 212 352 9464
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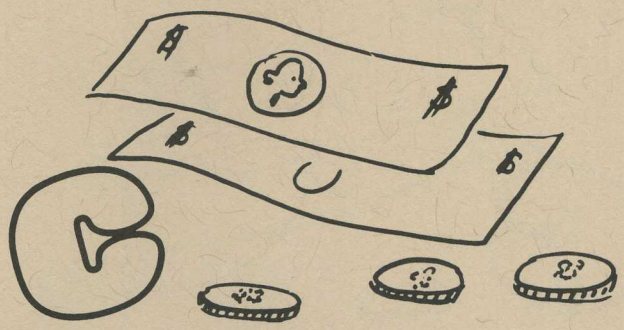


cool
cat

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cornbread
cash

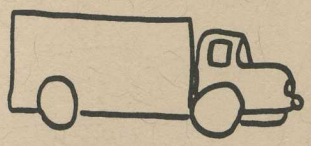




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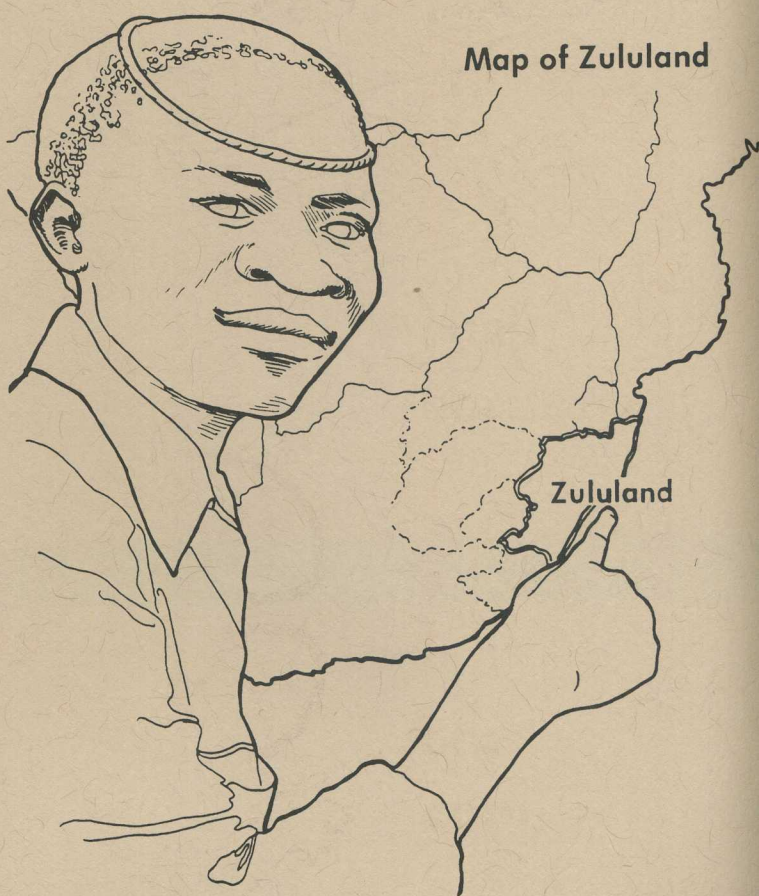


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man

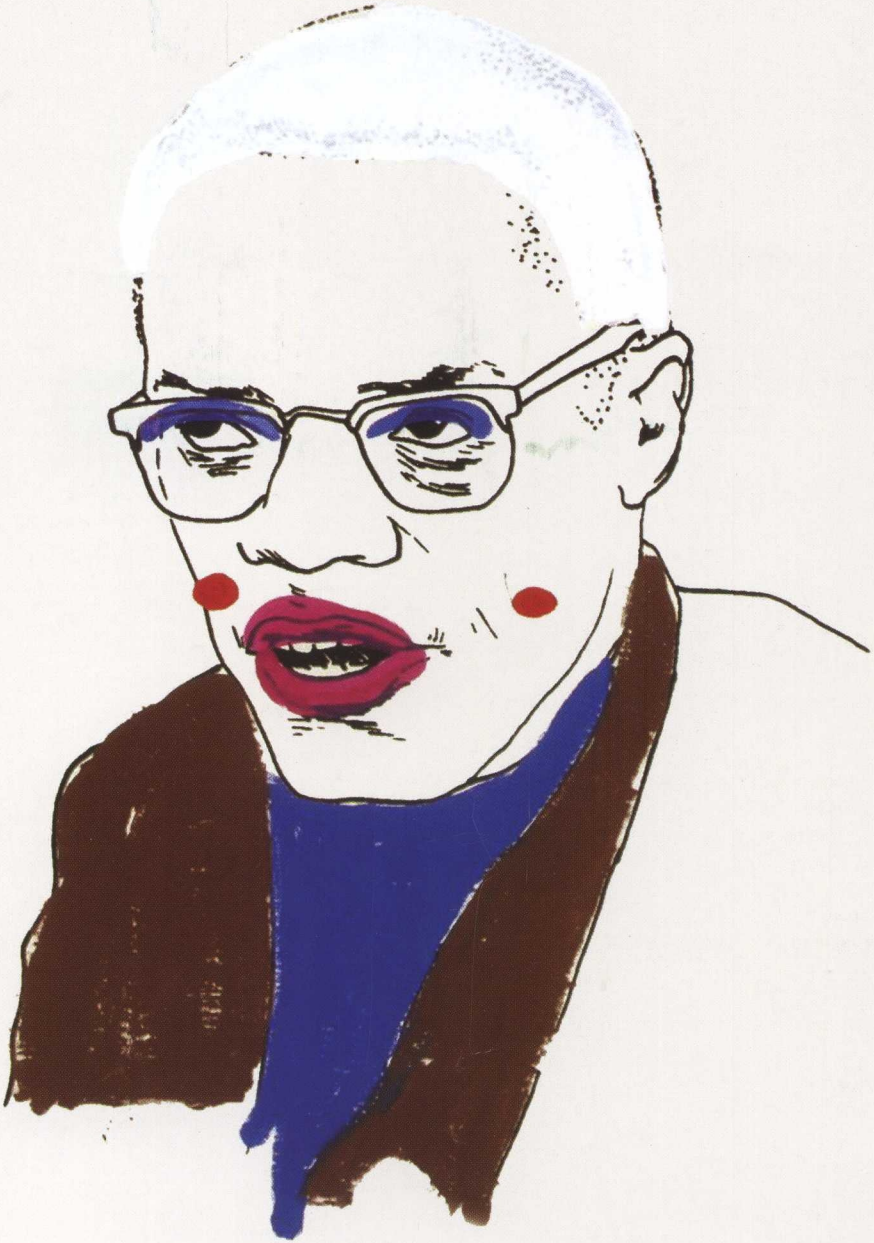
Zululand is in South Africa

Map of Zululand



Zululand







GLENN LIGON

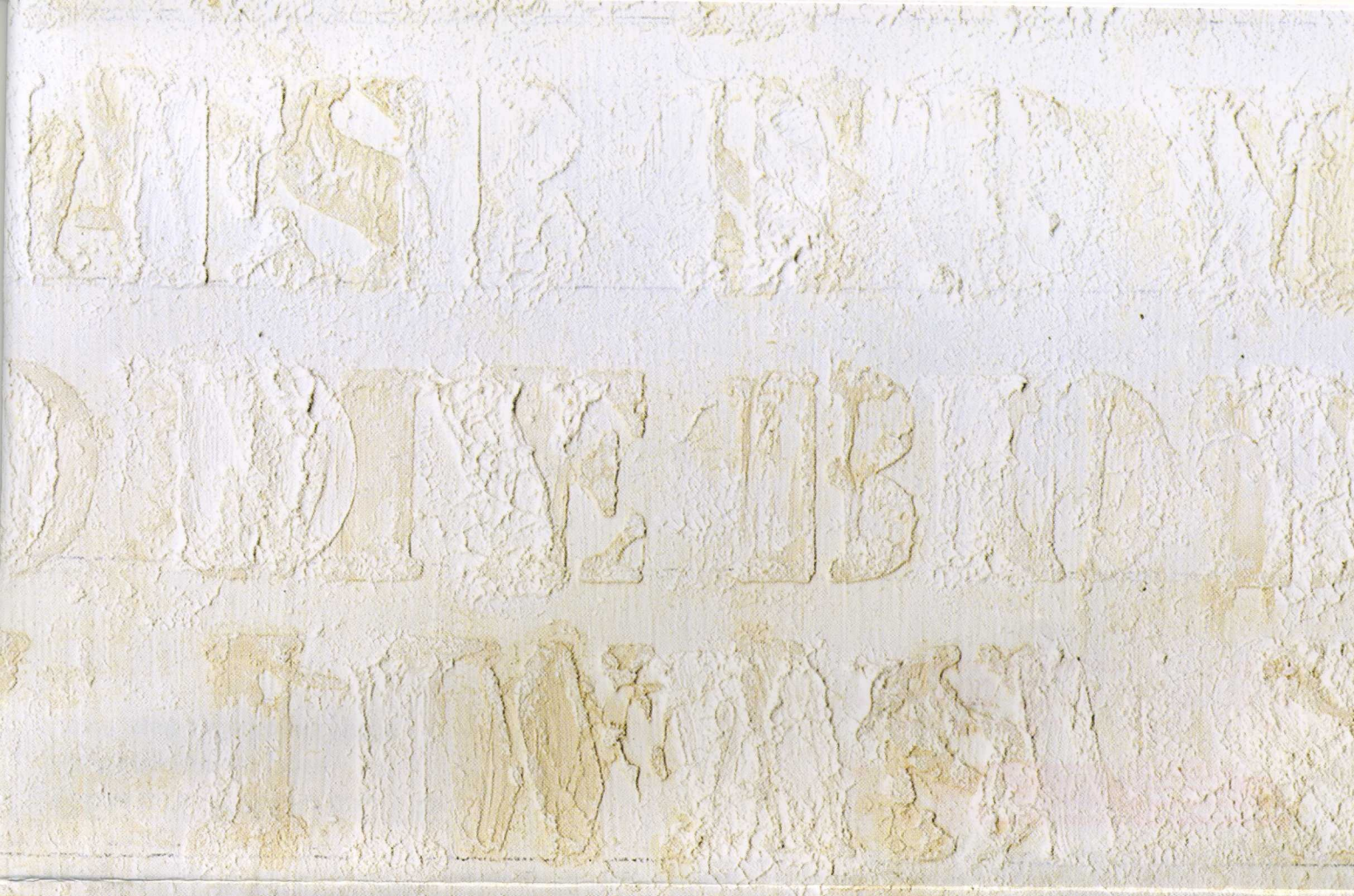
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RACE AND THE SUBJECT OF MASCULINITIES
Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, editors
DUKE

OFAY
Earl Shorris
delacorte press

WALTER MOSLEY WALKIN' THE DOG
LITTLE, BROWN

The Bluest Eye, a novel by Toni Morrison
Holt Rinehart Winston

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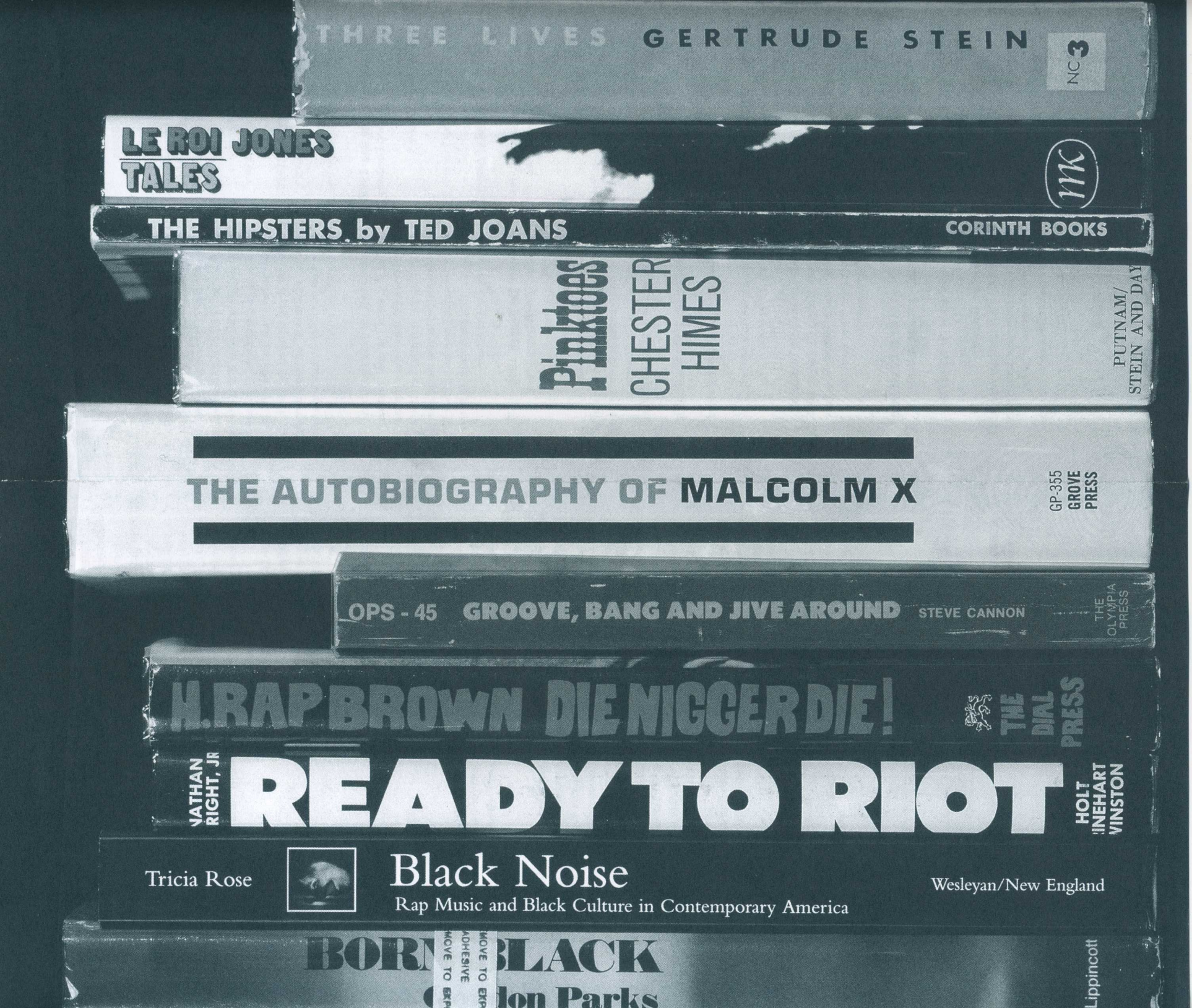
Contemporary Black Artists In America
DODD, MEAD

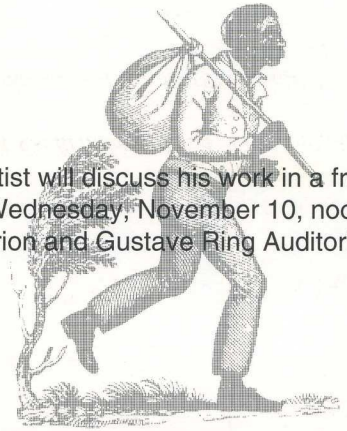
LETTING DOWN MY HAIR
By LORRIE DAVIS with Rachel Gallagher
ARTHUR FIELDS BOOKS

Ain't no ambulances for no nigguhs tonight
Stanley Crouch
Baron

The Fire Next Time
James Baldwin
Dial

RICHARD WRIGHT
The Outsider
HARPER


THREE LIVES GERTRUDE STEIN
NC 3
LE ROI JONES
TALES
THE HIPSTERS by TED JOANS
CORINTH BOOKS
Pinktoes
CHESTER HIMES
PUTNAM/
STEIN AND DAY
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM X
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Black Noise
Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America
Wesleyan/New England
BORN BLACK
Lippincott



The artist will discuss his work in a free talk
Wednesday, November 10, noon
Marion and Gustave Ring Auditorium

The Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution
and the Director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
cordially invite you to a preview of the exhibition

DIRECTIONS
Glenn Ligon: To Disembark

on Wednesday, November 10, 1993, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Independence Avenue at Seventh Street, S.W. Washington D.C.

The exhibition is supported in part by a grant from the Bohen Foundation
This invitation, which is nontransferable, admits two. Please present at door.

currents 81

GLENN LIGON

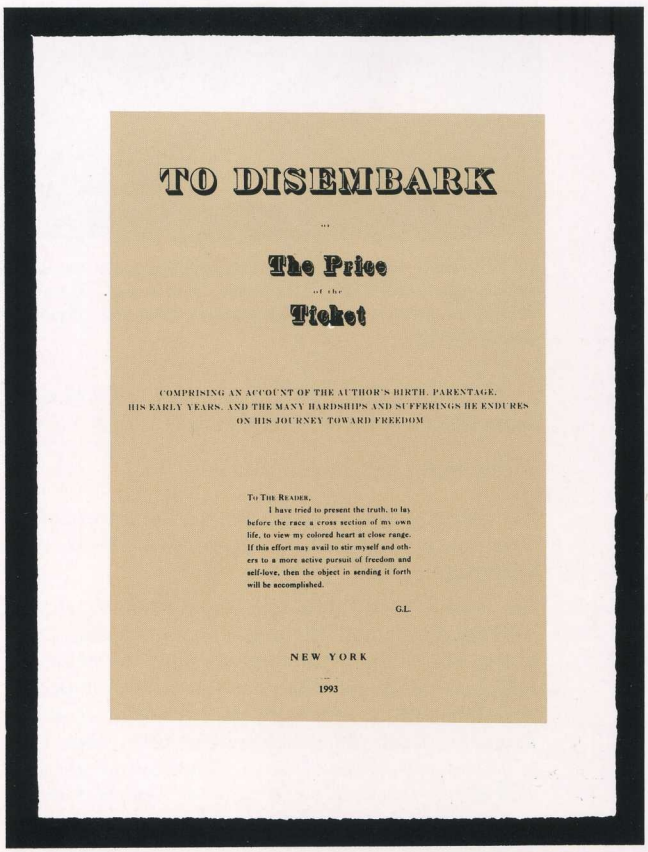


THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

DIRECTIONS

GLENN LIGON: TO DISEMBARK

NOVEMBER 11, 1993–FEBRUARY 20, 1994



Untitled, 1993. Etching and chine collé, 71.1 x 53.3 cm (28 x 21 in.). Collection of the artist, courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Photo by Dennis Cowley.

TO DISEMBARK SUGGESTS ARRIVAL AT THE end of a journey. A physical journey in literature and myth, in turn, frequently suggests a journey into one's self; a quest for self-knowledge.[1] Glenn Ligon's work has often explored ways in which identity is constructed in relation to others or to suit expectations of a specific audience, and thus the impossibility of arriving at a single true self. Ligon is perhaps best-known for paintings based on texts related to these themes by such authors as James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Mary Shelley, and Jean Genet.

In this exhibition, which has four discrete elements, Ligon continues to probe issues of self-definition. Wooden boxes, using international symbols that define fragility, emit barely audible sounds (a heartbeat, Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit" and "Traveling Light," disco music by Royal House; fig. 1). The boxes vary slightly in size and construction method, but all take their proportions from the one in which a slave, Henry "Box" Brown, was shipped from Richmond, Virginia, to freedom in Philadelphia in 1849 (fig. 2).[2] In the same gallery are lithographs imitating 19th-century advertisements for the return of escaped slaves (fig. 3). All name and describe the artist himself (he asked friends to describe him without giving a reason and used their descriptions to create the prints). In another part of the exhibition, three quotes from an essay by Zora Neale Hurston, which Ligon had also used in a series of 1990 paintings (fig. 4), are stenciled directly on the walls.[3] Accompaning them are etchings with chine collé (a process by which a thin piece of high-quality paper is glued to a less-expensive backing paper) that mimic frontispieces of the 19th-century narratives published by white abolitionists in which former slaves recounted their lives under slavery and the stories of their escapes (cover). Ligon has replaced the Bible verses and anti-slavery poems that often appeared on the title pages of the 19th-century narratives with quotes from contemporary authors such as Hilton Als, bell hooks, and others. Like the runaway posters that describe him, these narratives tell the story of the artist. As Ligon expressed it:

> The show seems to be coalescing around the idea of absence and presence. How is identity constructed? What are the narratives of one's own life, and, for Americans, are those narratives by necessity formed against the background of slavery? Who are the other "masters" from which we flee? Who is the audience I am writing for and does my narrative change if I am not concerned with addressing white audiences? If the crate is that which brings the "art object" to the museum, what are the implications of that container being the "object" and what does it mean that that container suggests the body but does not contain it?[4]



Fig. 1 Untitled, 1993. Three wood and mixed-media boxes, each approximately 76.2 x 91.4 x 61.0 cm (36 x 30 x 24 in.). Collection of the artist, courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Photo by Dennis Cowley.

The following text was edited from a series of interviews with the artist in July and August 1993.

Phyllis Rosenzweig, Associate Curator

PR: Can you fill in some biographical information: where you grew up, who encouraged you to think about becoming an artist?

GL: I was born and grew up in the Bronx in an average working class family. My parents separated when I was young. My mother sent my brother and me to private school on scholarship when we were in the first grade. I was always encouraged to do art, if not to be an artist. I thought seriously about becoming an artist when I got to college and realized that I was not cut out to be an architecture major, as I had planned, because I wasn't very interested in math and physics. Studio art courses were required for architecture majors, so I decided to major in art and see what happened. Painting became a kind of refuge for me. The time I spent in the studio was the only time when I could clear my head and concen-

trate. I was interested in Abstract Expressionism, and I am sure I had absorbed part of that mythology: the heroic artist struggling against internal demons. But that was an important time in my development because it taught me to trust my vision and working method.

PR: Why did you start using stencils?

GL: In the mid-1980s I had reached a crisis of sorts in terms of my abstract work and was looking for a way to incorporate ideas from theoretical and literary texts. Using text as the work itself seemed a very economical solution. I started using stencils because they were cheap, durable, and an efficient way of conveying information using paint, which is a very sensuous, tactile, and inefficient material. I was using quotes, and the stencils allowed me to introduce a bit of distance and impersonality to the process. The first works I did with stencils had very painterly backgrounds. Later I just stenciled over a white ground—which is the way we are used to seeing text—but I repeated the quotes. I was interested in what happened if you broke a sentence down in terms of its legibility and the meaning of its individual parts, and in how the line breaks and the accumulation of paint on the stencil teased the traces of other meanings out of the sentences.

PR: The stenciled quotes are very beautiful in a handmade way. Does the meaning of your work change when you use more mechanical printing techniques?

GL: Curiously, the more "hands off" the production method, the more personal investment is evident in the work. The work in this show is among the most autobiographical I have ever done. We read paintings as "personal" because they are so identified with the artist's hand, but even though my work plays with the idea of unmediated access to the artist (the sentences I use often have the word "I" in them), it is in some ways very detached. I use stencils and quotes from other people's texts, after all. I am interested in the border between what is mechanical, repetitive, impersonal and what is autobiographical.

PR: Is that what interested you in the slave narratives? They are autobiographical yet formulaic.

GL: I recently became interested in slave narratives because their modes of address and the conditions under which they were written had certain parallels to my questions about audiences and cultural authority. The purpose of the narratives was twofold: first, to create consensus in the nation that slavery as an institution was immoral and should be opposed; and, second, to convince white people, by the very act of writing, that the author of the narrative and, by extension, the masses of enslaved black people were indeed human and worthy of freedom. I was interested in contemporary traces of the conditions under which former captives wrote their narratives. For example: what are the conditions under which works by black artists enter the museum? Do we enter only when our "visible difference" is evident? Why do many shows with works by colored people (and rarely whites) have titles that include "race" and "identity?" Who is my work for and what do different audiences demand of it? Toni Morrison says that the

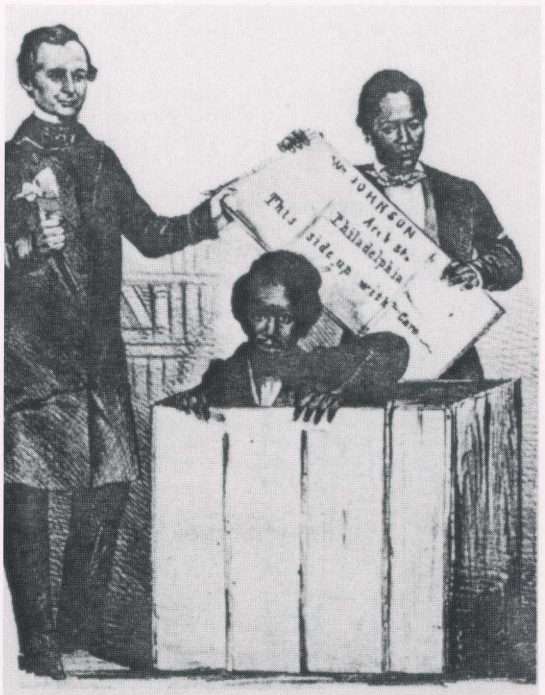


Fig. 2 Henry "Box" Brown. New York Public Library Picture Collection.

writers of slave narratives often stopped short of really describing the horrors of slavery because they feared that white audiences, even sympathetic ones, would be turned off if the accounts were too graphic. What are contemporary examples of that? What do black audiences not want to hear? (I see the positive image/negative image debate now raging in the black community as

an outgrowth of the mission of the slave narrative). Frederick Douglass, in later editions of his narrative, changed the descriptions of his mother from someone he hardly knew to a woman of great nobility of character and intelligence. He created in his remembrance of his mother a character his audiences could have instant sympathy for. I was interested in the idea of invention and self-invention in autobiography as it speaks to counteracting essentialist notions of black identity. The "one" that I am is composed of narratives that overlap, run parallel to, and often contradict one another.

PR: Do the Zora Neale Hurston quotes have a special meaning for you? Are they related to the narratives?

GL: The Hurston quotes were the first ones I used as repeating sentences. They are meaningful in that they talk about the idea of race as a concept that is structured by context rather than by essence. One can "become colored." One is not born black; "blackness" is a social construction. Part of the task of the narratives was to demonstrate the slaves' ability to write and thus convince white people that there was nothing inherent in black people to justify their enslavement. In a famous sentence in his narrative, Douglass says "you have seen how a man was made a slave, now you shall see how a slave was made a man." This is an important intervention in the idea that blacks were subhuman by birth.[5]

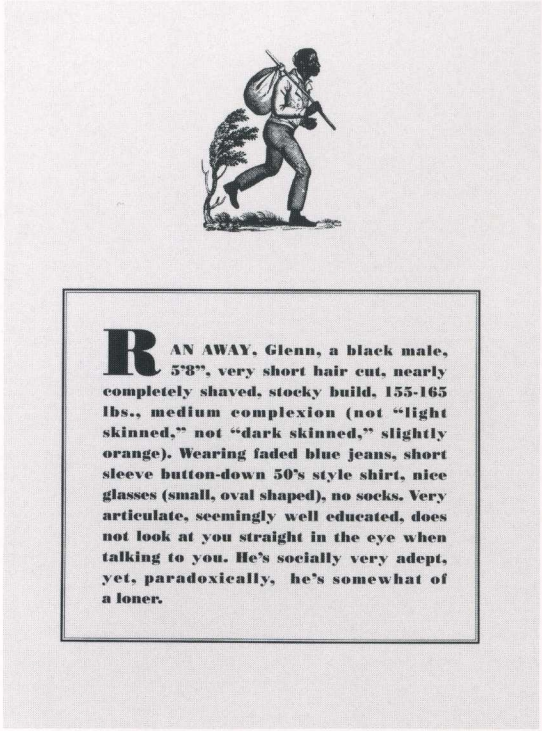


Fig. 3 Untitled, 1993. Offset lithograph on paper, 40.6 x 30.5 cm (16 x 12 in.). Collection of the artist, courtesy Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Photo by David Cowley.

PR: The boxes share some qualities with the abstract forms of Minimal sculpture. They allude to the crate in which Henry Brown shipped himself North. You have mentioned other references to me: Egyptian coffins, Marcel Duchamp's autobiographical *Boîte en Valise*, a portable museum that he made containing replicas of his life's work. Can you elaborate on how these sources come together in your work? To me, they contain the essence of this exhibition, which you described during our conversations as coalescing around themes of absence, presence, and identity.

GL: The crate that Henry Brown was shipped in was made to fit his body, and in some sense became an extension of that body. My paintings, through the use of the pronoun "I" and their anthropomorphic scale, also reference the body. (They are often 80 by 30 inches, the standard dimensions of a door, and the size of a wooden door that was left behind in a studio I once occupied. Because I was too lazy to haul it out to the street, I moved the door whenever I wanted to work on the wall space behind it. I realized that a door is scaled for the human body and proportioned in a familiar way. Many of the quotes I have used for my work are about the body and the voice, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," for example, so it seemed natural to use a format that would be read as "body.") Early Egyptian coffins are painted with hieroglyphs and a pair of eyes so that the body inside can "see." These things came together when I read Henry Brown's narrative and I began to organize the exhibition around the idea of the box, the missing slave, and the slave telling the story of his escape. Nineteenth-century traveling shows put on by abolitionists restaged the escape of slaves from the South, but my aim was never to recreate Henry Brown's escape. I was interested, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, in how I positioned myself and was positioned by these narratives of the past.[6] I am positioning myself against a certain historical experience and trying to find the connections between it and who I am.

1. The exhibition's title alludes to that of a book by the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, *To Disembark* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1981).

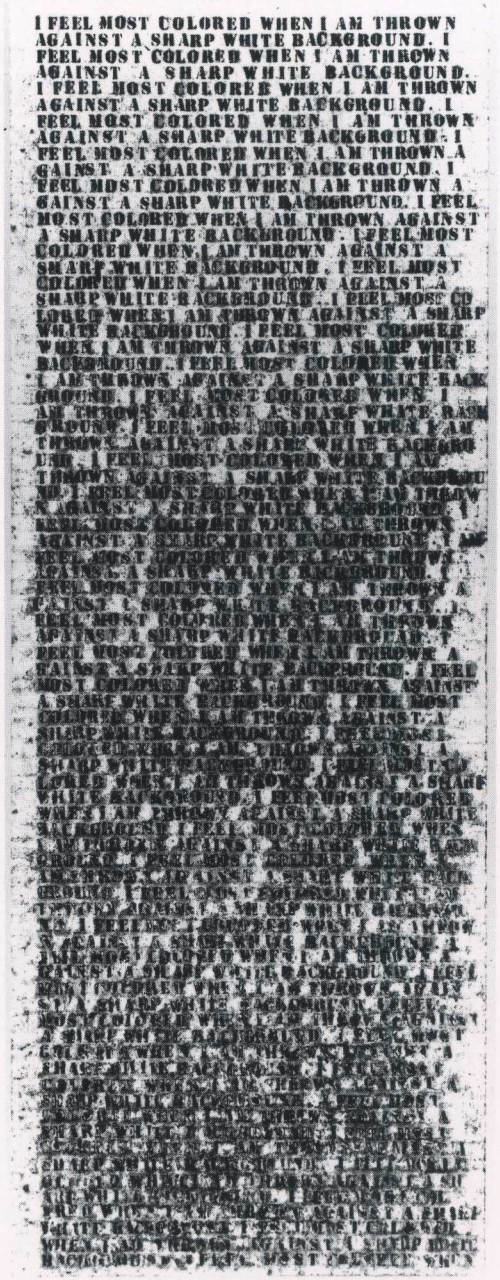
2. See "Henry 'Box' Brown" in *Black Men in Chains: Narratives by Escaped Slaves*, Charles H. Nichols, ed. (New York: Laurel Hill & Co., 1972), 178–99.

3. Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, Alice Walker, ed., (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1979), 152–55; repr. in *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 32–37.

4. Letter to the author, May 31, 1993.

5. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Signet, 1968, originally published in 1845), 77. It was illegal for slaves to learn to read and write (among other reasons, it was feared that they would forge passes for themselves and escape). Illiteracy was then cited as proof of inferior status and thus justification for enslavement.

6. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford, ed. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 225.


I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN I AM THROWN AGAINST A SHARP WHITE BACKGROUND.